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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1539
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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0336
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 0113
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 0113
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SUBJECT: YOUNG BOYS AND MEN SUFFER SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AS TRADITIONAL
DANCERS IN EAST INDIA

1. Summary: A United Nations Development Program (UNDP) funded report entitled "Dancing Boys: Traditional Prostitution of Young Males in India" highlights the problem of sexual abuse and exploitation of "launda dancers" - young boys and men, who are hired to dance (in women's clothing) at marriage ceremonies and Hindu festivals in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The report was conducted by non-government organization (NGO) People Like Us (PLUS) and involved a survey of 400 boys and young men. The report notes that there is very little awareness about this traditional practice of launda dancing in Northern India. It recommends that national, state and local governments and NGOs recognize the issue, take appropriate measures and provide resources to address the problem. The report is available at <http://www.crin.org/docs/dancing%20boy.pdf>. End Summary.

2. Traditionally, "laundas," young boys in the age range of 15 - 25 years were hired by poor families in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh who could not afford women dancers to perform at weddings and festivals. Over time, "launda naach" has become an integral part of such celebrations and demand for laundas has grown. Lured by money and faced with very limited options to participate in mainstream occupations, effeminate boys from poor families are tempted or sometimes forced into this profession. PLUS estimates that there are approximately 5,000 launda dancers, with almost half coming from West Bengal.

3. The launda dancers mainly originate from West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra and also from Nepal and Bangladesh via West Bengal. They are introduced into the profession through peers who act as pimps, elderly laundas, and orchestra party members. They migrate from place to place within the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh during the marriage season,

between April and June in Summer and December to February in Winter. Usually, orchestra companies hire launda dancers on contract and pay them a lump sum of money in addition to free food and accommodation. However, the money offered to the dancers is only a fraction of what the orchestra owners actually receive from clients.

14. The problems faced by the launda dancers are many. The owners of orchestra parties they belong to force them into prostitution. The dancers have to cope with frequent physical and sexual assaults from intoxicated clients. Young boys unable to defend themselves are sometimes gang raped by men at weddings and festivities where they are sent to dance. Due to their mobility, multiple partners and unsafe sexual practices, they are at a high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. In many cases, forced by circumstances, laundas accept castration, so that for the rest of the year (besides the marriage season) they can join the "hijra" (traditional transvestite) community to earn a living. The castration is often performed by quacks and a majority of the dancers suffer from post operation complications and infections for which they cannot go to government medical facilities, since their operation is technically illegal. As a result, approximately 25 percent die due to post castration problems.

15. The report puts forward some figures to highlight the magnitude of the problems faced by the launda dancers. The study was conducted among 400 respondents, primarily launda dancers in the age group of 15 - 25 years. 76.75% of the respondents were from West Bengal, 7% from Uttar Pradesh, 4% from Bihar, 6% from Nepal, 1% from Bangladesh, and 5% from other

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parts of India. When asked about the reason for taking up the profession of launda dancing, 64.47% said they do it for money, 26.5% do it since they believe it is the only option they have, 7.9% do it because they believe dancing is their only skill. Regarding the migratory behavior of the launda dancers, 32.8% of the respondents changed their destination between 3-5 months, 59.39% between 6-11 months, 7.7% every 12 months.

16. With reference to sexual exploitation, the figures are alarming. 49% of the respondents said that their first sexual encounter was between 9-12 years. 88% reported that it was forced. 62.5% said they regularly faced sexual assault. 32.5% said they had sex with 21-30 partners in the last month, 25% said they had 31-40 partners. High mobility, forced sexual acts and multiple partners makes the launda dancers highly vulnerable to Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and HIV / AIDS infections. However, only 8.5% of the respondents said that they used condoms regularly. As a result, 42% of the respondents reported that they were suffering from STDs in the last six months. Although 69.7% said that they had heard about HIV, barely 16% had actually gone in for testing.

17. Comment: The report brings to the focus the plight of children and young adults who face physical and sexual abuse under the guise of a socially accepted tradition of dancing in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. It also makes several recommendations to relieve the misery of this community. Recommendations include the creation of "healing centers" for gender variant boys subjected to violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, raising awareness about HIV/AIDS prevention and practicing safe sex, and improving access of members of this community to state funded medical services. However, given the limited awareness about this problem of exploitation of young boys and men, it would also require a concerted effort by government offices and NGOs to change social attitudes and to

improve enforcement of laws against sexual assault. End Comment.
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